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ABSTRACT

Visits to nine of the smallest rural elementary schools in Colorado were conducted to gain insights into types of communities served by the schools. No one definition of "rural" covered all nine communities, so they were classified into six types: predominantly agricultural, rural industrial, stable recreational, ranching/railraod, rural commuter, and loosely structured/isolated. The Arriba (22 students), Gleneyre (10), and Shamrock (3) schools were in differing agricultural communities. Powderwash was an example of a rural industrial community (a gas company town), with 16 pupils in its school. Poudre School had 15 students, most from families connected with nearby resorts. A railroad/ranching community school, McCoy Elementary (20 students) provided the last opportunity, as in Powderwash, for the community to participate in and control the socialization of its children, as high school students were bused elsewhere. Gold Hill (25 students) and Cherry Valley (26) schools were rural in location, but attached to larger, non-rural districts. Brown's Park School with 13 students, mainly from sheep ranches and copper mining families, was the major factor drawing the community together. All nine schools provided the most important social institution around which the communities were organized; eight no longer had the authority to determine whether their schools would continue to operate; all communities considered teachers important. (MH)

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RURAL SCHOOL COMMUNITIES IN COLORADO

by

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December 1983

Foreword

The following article is a report of visits to nine of the smallest rural elementary schools in Colorado. These visits, completed in October and November, 1981, were conducted to gain insights relative to the realities of teaching in rural schools, the types of communities served by the schools and to solicit suggestions which might assist colleges and universities to more adequately prepare teachers for rural schools. The knowledge gained is also the basis for a survey research involving approximately fifty small rural elementary schools in Colorado. This first article, although it will refer to many school attributes, will concentrate on the socio-economic nature of the communities in which the schools are located.

Introduction

> To one who has given little or no attention to the subject, it is hard to appreciate the great revolution in rural life which has taken place during the past three quarters of a century. The changes which have been accomplished have been of far-reaching importance and they have touched every phase of rural life. Almost nothing is now as it used to be; almost nothing is done now as it was three quarters of a century ago. We of to-day live in a new world--a world of which our grandfathers scarcely dreamed. (Cubberley, 1914)

Cubberley was insightful about the impact of change relative to rural life and rural schools in 1914, but he had no way of imagining the revolutionary changes which would continue to affect rural life in general, and schools in particular. Although it is common knowledge that the United States has

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developed into a predominately urbanized society, it remains that more than sixty million people live in rural communities (Sher, 1977), (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1970). In Colorado alone rural population totals 680,000 or 31% of the state's population of nearly three million (Advanced Report: 1980 Census of Population and Housing, Colorado, 1981. Always the source of food, building materials and fuel, rural areas, especially in Colorado, also provide two increasingly demanded resources: water and recreational space. These urban needs require that people continue to live in less populated areas, a situation which in turn requires schools capable of providing rural children with adequate educational opportunities. Since the 1950's it has been recognized that because of geography and population distribution, some small rural schools are quite necessary (Nachtigal, 1980). Just as rural life has economically and culturally been affected by urban influences, rural schools in particular have been influenced by models of urban education (Tyack, 1974), (Sher, 1977). Despite the many pressures to consolidate small schools into larger and larger institutions, devoid of local community pressures, many very small rural schools continue to exist. In these schools, the education of rural children continues and through them, rural people define and perpetuate their own sense of community.

Accurate generalizations about rural schools and communities are increasingly difficult to make. As the economies in some rural areas shifted from the agriculture to recreation or from agriculture to mining, there have been changes in the social backgrounds of rural populations. One observed change is that many rural families really have their roots in the cities rather than in the countryside. Just as rural people who move to cities find it difficult to shed rural ways, urbanites who now live in rural settings tend to retain the values and attitudes of urban life. In these

areas, usually characterized by population growth, there exists a mixture of rural and urban social and educational values. Despite this observation, rural schools and towns are not miniature replicas of larger communities. The nine school-communities visited for this study are less affected by urban influences since they are extremely rural and not characterized by noticeable population growth. Most of them, on the other hand, would probably demonstrate a decline in population, but remain similar to what they were many years ago. These observations suggest that rural communities are diverse and neither the communities at large, nor their schools, can be classified by simplistic generalizations (Nachtigal, 1980).

The term "rural" is frequently used as though there is a widely accepted singular meaning for it. One usually thinks that it means an area, a community, containing a small population. But, where does "rural" begin and end, especially in times of rapid transportation, television and mass culture? Despite this definitional problem, there are observable differences between urban and rural communities if we, as suggested by Paul Nachtigal, ... "think about rural/urban differences in terms of a continuum." Community characteristics which distinguish rural from urban include the following: rural communities tend to be personal; rural residents are more self-sufficient and rely less on highly trained specialists; and, the communities tend to be homogeneous with reference to general culture and economic status (Nachtigal, 1980). Rural residents also exhibit a high degree of ownership with reference to their schools, churches and space. They "know" who belongs to the community and who does not.

Most of the working definitions of "rural" center around the density of population and distance from urban centers. The United States Census identifies rural areas as those containing fewer than 2500 inhabitants (1970).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) uses the terms "extreme rural" and "small places." An "extreme rural" area would normally have a population of less than 2500 although it may have as many as 10,000 if widely distributed. A "small place" would range from 10,000 to 25,000 (NAEP, 1981). A recent study by the Rand Corporation (Bass and Berman, 1979) used six definitions of "rural" in which the significant differences were population and proximity to a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) as defined by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Finally, the Association of Teacher Educators (Franzen, 1979) defined as "rural" those communities with a population of less than 30,000. Certain factors seem to be common in these attempts to define "rural." A rural area has fewer people than do cities, but it may include small cities if outside a SMSA, and ruralness increases in direct relationship to distance from main cities. It must be noted that the above definitions are quantitative in nature and that there are important qualitative differences (Nachtigal, 1980). These include the fact that change is not as rapid as it is in urban areas, and that the personal, social and political climate is apt to be more conservative.

There is at least one attribute of "rural" which is a tradition, especially in cities. This is the negative stereotype that rural people are somehow less sophisticated, less intellectual than their city counterparts. Such negative attitudes have been used against rural schools and rural children (Sher, 1977). Small schools came to be regarded as inferior, an attitude perpetuated by the proponents of school consolidation (Tyack, 1974), (Sher, 1977). Such attitudes have been a problem for those who support rural education since the consolidators in most states seem to believe that good education is more likely to take place in schools modeled on urban systems.

Just as rural communities exhibit rich diversity, rural schools are equally diverse institutions and clearly reflect the values of the communities in which they are located. At first glance, one is tempted to classify all rural schools as "typically rural," but on close inspection one finds that such thinking is a gross oversimplification, an observation also made by Gjelten (1980). Even when two rural school-communities are attached to the same school district, considerable differences are readily observable. Each of the nine schools visited are extensions of, and at the same time, help define the communities in which they were located. Students regarded classmates and teachers as part of their world, their neighborhood. Parents knew virtually all other parents and thus the attendance area was strongly influential in determining who "belonged" to the community. Although the idea of the school as community determinant may be less true today (due to mass communication), it has a rather long history when applied to rural communities (Bowen, 1944). This notion has special application to communities which are relatively isolated (Sargent, c.1921)

Despite the fact that rural communities differ from one another, it remains that within each community there is a greater degree of homogeneity than one finds in urban centers (Sher, 1977). These characteristics carry over into the school, a fact rural teachers learn very quickly. Community standards were definitely understood by the teachers in these nine small schools.

School Communities

Due to social and economic changes, it is impossible to develop a working definition of a rural community which accurately defines the nine school communities visited during September and October, 1981. For the purpose of placing these nine very small schools within their community

settings, brief descriptions of five types of communities will be presented. Each school will be identified and placed within one of six community types. As the nine schools were visited, information relative to the socio-economic bases of the school communities was acquired from teacher, parents and students. Information acquired facilitated the development of a crude classification scheme. Although six types of rural communities seemed to emerge, it is by no means assumed that these community types would hold true if one were to visit other rural communities. It must be remembered that the nine schools were extremely small and that other communities are just as likely to represent quite different socio-economic circumstances. A second reservation relative to the classifications must be made. Although two of the community-types each contain more than one school, it should not be assumed that the communities themselves were similar in most respects. There were some overall similarities, but in one sense, there is no such phenomena as a "typical rural community." My scheme includes the following community types: (1) Predominately Agricultural Communities; (2) Rural Industrial Community; (3) Stable Recreation Community; (4) Ranching/Railroad Community; (5) Rural Commuter Communities; and (6) Loosely Structured-Isolated Community.

Predominately Agricultural Communities: Three of the schools visited are located in agricultural communities, but there are significant differences among these communities. Arriba Elementary School (22 students) is a one-room, two teacher facility attached to the Arriba Secondary School. The Town of Arriba has a population of approximately 260 and is the center of a larger community for which the economic base is dry-land farming. Most of the students come from families who live on farms, or from families engaged in agriculture but which live in town. Other children are from the homes of

farm employees and/or businesses in the area. This particular community would be classified as "extreme rural" by NAEP and as "rural" by the U.S. Census. School and town are almost inseparable in the minds of parents and there is great concern about keeping the school system open and independent despite growing financial considerations. Since there is a high school, students who finish elementary school can complete high school without leaving the community. Three teacher-parents expressed strong support for the benefits of a small school in which every child was important. There is concern about the fact that some residents of the Arriba district send their children to a neighboring district which has a larger enrollment.

The school-community of Arriba is unique among the communities visited in that there is an actual town in addition to the population which lives outside the immediate vicinity of the school. When one observes the importance of the school to the town, especially with respect to the entertainment functions of schools, it is readily apparent that the Arriba school is perhaps the most important element in the community's identity. In one sense the school represents the community's own sense of continuity into the future.

Gleneyre Elementary School (10 students), located approximately 80 miles northwest of Fort Collins is part of the Poudre (Fort Collins) School District. The immediate area is characterized by large cattle ranches plus a few guest ranches. The Gleneyre community stretches south from the Wyoming state line for about fifteen to twenty miles. Through the years many of the ranches have been acquired by absentee owners, but the ranches continue to be operated by resident employees. Although the largest number of the ten students come from the homes of ranch employees, there is some variety in home background. There is a strong sense of community surrounding Gleneyre School and a

determination to keep the school open, especially since it is likely that additional children and grandchildren from "old" families will enroll within a few years. For the Gleneyre school community, the elementary school is the only school over which the community can exercise ownership, since most attend high school in Laramie, Wyoming. In most cases, families arrange for their children to live in Laramie since transportation is not provided. Daily transportation to and from the Gleneyre School is not provided, but parents are reimbursed for providing this service. As a result, the teacher is in daily contact with a majority of the parents, or with someone who will see the parents of the various students. This enables the teacher to develop direct communication, but it also makes him very visible to the community. The teacher, his wife and family are definitely included in the community. The community adults seem to regard the school as an important educational resource for the children and they use the school as a community center.

The third school located within a predominately agricultural area is quite different from the first two. Shamrock School (3 students) located in a dryland farm/ranching area on the high plains is approximately 65 miles east of Denver. According to the U.S. Census information, the school is within the Denver SMSA and would not, therefore, be classified as "rural." But as one travels the 35 miles of gravel roads from the school district office in Byers, and observes the sparse population, it is readily apparent that the area is definitely rural. One of the distinguishing characteristics of this area is that of declining population brought on by the mechanization of farms and ranches. The Shamrock School facilities could readily accommodate twenty to thirty students, but at this time, there are three pupils, one

each in the first, second and third grades. It is noted that there will be an increase of one or two pupils next year. The school is a meeting place for a variety of community activities and although most adults do not have children in school at this time, community identity is determined by the school attendance area.

On one hand, the Shamrock community is characterized by declining population due to the mechanization of large farms. This might suggest that the school is no longer defensible, especially when one examines the economic cost. On the other hand, the school is the center of the community as it does provide education within the area for the few children who are still there. And, it does suggest to potential residents that children are valued.

Rural Industrial Community: One usually thinks of industrial communities existing in metropolitan area, but in a real sense many people living in sparsely populated areas work in the industrial world. Powderwash, a gas company town in northwest Colorado, is an example of this type of community. Approximately ninety persons live in Powderwash, a town in which every building was constructed by "the company." Houses, although somewhat small, are well constructed and neatly arranged along two streets. From the appearance of the children, vehicles and horse trailers, it can be inferred that the economic base of Powderwash is quite substantial. The sixteen children, grades 1 through 7, walk to school and eat lunch at home and since most of the mothers are unemployed, there seems to be a great deal of attention given to school concerns. The one teachers, who does not receive any special assistance, lives directly across the street from the school and is always visible to the community. This does not necessarily cause difficulty, but it is quite different from living in a rural area where the population is dispersed. There is no company store so almost all shopping is done in Craig

located approximately 65 miles to the southeast. If children wish to attend high school, they may board in Baggs, Wyoming, or in Craig, Colorado. Some families prefer to enroll their children in an approved correspondence school rather than permit them to "board in town." Although the nature of the community as a company town would certainly continue without a school, it is obvious that the school provides the most important social organizer in the community. For example, "picture day" at the school provided an opportunity for families to have children, including pre-schoolers photographed, something urban families can easily do outside of school settings.

Finally, the elementary school in Powderwash provides the last opportunity for parents to dominate the socialization of their children. Since children must leave the community if they are to attend high school, the elementary school's importance is greatly expanded. If the school were to be closed, children would have to attend school "in town" and thus the role of parents in the larger education of children would be reduced. When the school is regarded in this sense, it becomes the very essence of the town's sense of community.

Stable Recreation Community The Poudre Elementary School, now enrolling 15 students is attached to the Poudre School District in Fort Collins, approximately 45 miles away. The "canyon" is populated by a rather diverse group of people most of whom are connected to resorts which cater to families and older tourists. In the past, a few families engaged in some ranching and/or timber businesses. There is a stable population who tend to work in the resorts, and there is a summer population. Some of the latter group have been coming to the canyon for many years and are known and accepted by the permanent residents.

The social life of the canyon centers around the school, a chapel and a library, all of which are located in immediate proximity to each other. The library building is the original Eggers School which was moved next door to the present school. In 1968 the school was closed since there would have been only one student the following year, but a few families with school-age children moved to the canyon and the school was re-opened in 1974. In the fall of 1981 there were twelve students but additions this year increased the student body to the present fifteen. Although there is general stability in the number of children attending Poudre School, there is some change since resort employees do seem to change jobs frequently. It is quite possible that since the school is open more families will decide to live in the canyon as it was observed that a few children and/or grandchildren from "old families" are now in attendance. In this sense, the school is a vital factor in shaping the structure of the community's population.

Consistent with other rural communities, children face difficult decisions when they reach high school age. It is necessary to arrange to live in, or for daily transportation to Fort Collins. Some families prefer to enroll their children in approved correspondence schools rather than permit attending high school "in town." In many recreational areas of Colorado, rapid increases in population are quite common, but in the Poudre Canyon this is not the case. This community is stable and the importance of the school cannot be overlooked since the school attendance area is a major determinant in defining this community.

During the years the Poudre Canyon school was closed, the effects on the population structure simply meant that school age persons were effectively eliminated, at least during the school week. Now that the school is open,

the population characteristics can approach those of other communities in which children are normal, desired, participants.

A Ranching/Railroad Community: McCoy Elementary School, enrolling twenty students, grades K-8 with two teachers, is the only community visited which previously had its own high school only to lose it through consolidation. Located in the old high school building, McCoy School is now part of the Eagle County School District. Within this district are the rapidly growing recreational communities of Vail and Avon. But, since McCoy is approximately thirty-five miles from Eagle and forty miles from the district office in Gypsum, there is considerable geographic isolation from the more rapidly changing sections of the school district. The economic bases of the community are dominated by ranching and the railroad. This fact seems to cause an unintentional division in the community, since the railroad centers around the small town of Bond, while the ranching community seems to be focused on McCoy and the school. Parents did express a common fear that perhaps the Eagle County District would prefer to close the McCoy School. This defense of the school is importance since it gives the area a real sense of community. Although school enrollment is somewhat consistent, there is noticeable change each year. For example, this year the school opened with twenty-seven students only to see the enrollment drop to the present level of twenty. Most of this change seemed to be attributed to changes in railroad employment. For high school, McCoy school graduates are transported to Gypsum each day, a fact which may discourage some students from completing a full four years at the secondary level.

The elimination of the high school changed the McCoy community as families with high school age children found it difficult to live there and be supportive of their children's participation in the full life of a high school. The remaining elementary school has therefore taken on even more

importance than it once had. As in Powderwash the school provides the last opportunity for the community to fully participate in (and dominate) the socialization of its children. Some may argue that the community control of the school ought to be broken, but that is a value issue not easily resolved. Rural parents feel as strongly about the education of their children as do urban parents. Who is to say that one model should dominate?

Rural Commuter Communities: Two schools, Gold Hill and Cherry Valley, are rural by the nature of their locations but they are attached to larger school districts which, for the most part, are not rural. Gold Hill Elementary School is located approximately fourteen miles from the central school offices in Boulder. Enrolling 25 children in grades K-6, the school has the services of one full-time and one half-time teacher in addition to special teachers who travel from Boulder on a regular basis. Gold Hill is an old mining town that had its beginnings in the 1860's and when the mines were closed, the town simply continued, but with different populations. At this time the economic bases of the town are in Boulder and Denver. Highly educated parents commute to scientific, educational and industrial jobs, and prefer to raise their families in this beautiful mountain setting. This particular community is determined by the school attendance area and the physical dimensions of the mountain environment. There is little fluctuation in school population which is an indication that this is a rather stable community. There is great respect for individual privacy and at the same time there is extremely strong identification with the community, including the school. For their junior and senior high school years the youth of Gold Hill are transported to Boulder. There is a real fear that the Boulder Valley Schools may attempt to close Gold Hill School as was suggested during the winter of 1981-82. The school is important and if it were closed, the

probable loss of families would seriously change the character of the community. The Gold Hill School is not an example of a school which is the center of a rural community in a traditional sense since parents readily participate in the urban world. In order for this to take place the community needs the school, not so much for educational reasons, as for the support it lends to the life-style chosen by the adults.

Cherry Valley Elementary School, with its twenty-six students, two teachers and a secretary-aide is also located in a commuter-community. But, this community is quite a contrast from that of Gold Hill. Located approximately 22 miles from Castle Rock, the school came into existence during the consolidation movement in the early 1950's when five one-room schools were consolidated into one central elementary school. Cherry Valley School is now part of the Douglas County School District. At first glance, it would appear that the economy of the area would be dry-land farming and ranching, but for the most part this is not the case since few of the children come from full-time farm families. On the other hand, a large percentage of the children's parents are from this area. When questioned, many children informed this writer that they "lived on ranches." Further questions revealed that many of these "ranches" were very small (5-25 acres) and that the parents commute to employment in the Denver area forty miles away. Urban sprawl has not yet reached the area around the Cherry Valley School, but it becomes noticeable about ten miles north of the school. One teacher, a third generation native of the area, has been in this school for twenty-seven years while the second teacher has been there for the past twelve years. In this particular situation, the school is the center of a community which may, in time, realize rapid population growth. Parents fear that there will be increasing pressure to close this school and transport the children to the larger school

in Franktown, 12 miles away. For their high school years, the students are bussed to Douglas County High School located in Castle Rock, a distance of twenty-two miles.

Loosely Structured/Isolated Community: The Brown's Park School is the center of the community by the same name located approximately 85 miles northwest of Craig, Colorado. Economically, it is a diverse area. School students come from the homes of sheep ranch employees, Bureau of Land Management personnel, Colorado Division of Wildlife personnel, and miners. At the time of my visit, children from sheep ranches and a copper mine composed the largest proportion of the student body of thirteen. One teacher, who does not receive any special assistance, is responsible for the operation of the school. The school's attendance area is the major determinant of the community. It is the school which draws diverse people together, and which brings children together. Without the school, Brown's Park would be a general geographic term without much social significance. Along with the teacherage, the school is a center for entertainment and and socializing in general. Since school transportation is not provided, parents are responsible to see that their children get to school. As in other rural schools, this provides opportunity for the teacher and parents to become well acquainted and for parents to become well informed about the teacher and his family.

For their high school education, Brown's Park children must go to Craig to attend Moffatt County High School, One mother reported that all three of her children had done well in high school and that two had done well in academic work beyond high school. In this particular case, the family maintained a home in Craig and another on their Brown's Park ranch.

Due to the economic bases of life, residents of the area change frequently. This causes the student body to change as well. Most of the present students

have attended several different schools during their elementary education. In this isolated area, a sense of community would be severely strained if the school were to be closed.

Summary

Rural schools and the surrounding communities are interdependent. Each is important in defining the existence of the other. One cannot understand the characteristics of any rural school without examining the socio-economic bases of its support community. Density of population, economic bases, distance from urban areas, rapidity of change and commitment to education must be included in the list of variables on which communities may differ. It is important to examine these variables on a continuum rather than a set of polarities. The nine extremely small rural school communities visited are representative of at least six types of communities. In each of the nine communities, the school provided essential social functions in addition to education. Without the school, a sense of belonging to a self-perpetuating community would be jeopardized, especially for those families with school-age children.

Eight of the nine school communities no longer have the authority to determine if their schools shall continue to operate. Arriba alone, due to community rejection of consolidation, controls the future of its elementary school. Teachers and parents in the other eight schools live with the fear the administrators in central district offices would like to close the schools. The probability of this occurring decreases with the distance schools are located away from the central offices. For example, it would be extremely difficult to close the Gleneyre, Poudre, Powderwash, Brown's Park and, perhaps, Shamrock schools without seriously jeopardizing the education of those children. Other schools are more vulnerable.

In five of the school communities, students face serious problems if they are to graduate from high school. They must travel long distances or arrange to live in a community where there is a high school. The students of Arriba, Gold Hill, McCoy, and Shamrock can attend high school readily even though long bus rides are necessary for those from the last three communities. Commitment to high school appeared to be directly related to the difficulties faced, and to the educational levels of the parents.

In all nine communities teachers were considered important. The community exercised a sense of ownership over the schools and seemed to extend this to the teachers. All teachers who were interviewed were aware of this and were able to live with it. With one exception, all teachers expressed a desire to continue to teach in their present schools.

Conclusions

Each of the nine elementary schools visited is vital to the community in at least two ways. First, education is provided and second, the school is the most important social institution around which each community is organized. Schools, especially in the United States, are more than intellectual institutions. If rural communities lose their schools, they are losing their sense of belonging. It is extremely important to the millions of rural Americans that they do not lose this sense of being a vital part of the total society. School consolidation needs to be carefully examined on intellectual, financial and social bases. This idea is especially important when high school is considered. If the only concern were financial, extremely small high schools are difficult to defend. But, if one considers the contribution of rural people to the general welfare, and

if one believes that rural children have a right to a quality high school education, rural high schools can be defended on other grounds.

Some extremely small, rural schools are not only necessary, they are desirable. It seems to be unwarranted to force elementary school children to live away from home or to travel many unnecessary miles for the purpose of attending school.

Rural communities are richly diverse. The communities represent at least six types of communities, and it must be noted that other types of rural communities also exist in Colorado. For example, areas characterized by rapid development of energy resources, rapidly developing recreation areas, and ethnic agricultural communities would probably be quite different from those already identified.

A final conclusion seems warranted. Even though the United States has become a predominately urban society, it remains that a large percentage of the population will continue to live in rural areas--some out of choice, others because occupations will require them to do so. In either case, there will be rural children who have the right to quality education. It becomes very clear that rural schools are necessary and that if larger school districts continue to absorb the smaller ones, there must be a moral commitment to keep small schools operating even though there may be financial arguments which seem to question the practice.

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